

Assignment 1: thinking about identity: categorization, prototypes, stereotypes

Assignment:

Read all three essays. Think about how categorization "makes society possible":

- How do these authors describe the cognitive structure with which we think about people?
- Where do the categories come from?
- How do they change and evolve?
- How do we classify people we meet?
- What happens when the cues we get from the person do not fit any existing category?
- Why do we have the particular categories we have?
- Are they primarily descriptive (what is this person like) or prescriptive (how should I act toward them)?
- How is information about types of people shared?
- Is the development of these categories a personal or social process?

Response:

As articulated by Simmel, and exemplified by Holland & Skinner and Hirschfeld, we develop immense mental constructs about people, using detailed categorization to build intricate schemas for comparing and relating people along many axes of information. These constructs encompass many different aspects of an individual's self, weighting what the perceiver values during the interaction. The perceiver then uses this information to build assumptions and stereotypes that can be valuable for quickly making sense of the world around him.

Social interaction magnifies these constructs. In developing shared language by which to speak about the different constructs, people develop a common vocabulary as well as socially normative value judgements. Language allows for labels, but labels require an individual to narrow a rich mental image into coarse categorizations for shared description. Thus, while labels allow for people to share their perceptions and mental images of the world, they also start developing common categorizations that are both socially beneficial and harmful.

In developing a language around race and gender, many assumptions are made based on physical appearance. Visual appearance is most frequently what people use to develop these categorizations, using skin tone and sex characteristics. Using racial and sex labels, individuals then consider behaviors to narrow down those categories, resulting in assumptions that are not necessarily true if the same behavior is performed by someone of a different race/sex.

[Since race/gender assumptions are so pervasive in contemporary society, the fact that neither can be simply defined becomes immensely interesting. Not only can race not simply be seen through skin tone, but our conversations surrounding race in the States usually stem from our inability to discuss socio-economic class properly. Gender is problematic because it is most frequently tied to sex. For the most part, sex can be simply categorized into male/female, although the conversation gets hairy when we need to break sex down into chromosomes, hormone levels, genitalia, etc. Since approximately [99% of the population](#) have biological sex characteristics that can be generalized into male/female, this labeling is usually simple. The situation gets more convoluted when gender performance does not match sex (acquiring labels such as "tomboy" or "sissy"). To confuse the sex/gender dichotomy, sexuality often gets thrown into the mix, as is evident in Holland & Skinner's article, where the girls reference suitors' gender in relation to their sex and equate it to sexuality.]

Drawing from Simmel, we can imagine an individual's mental model to be a series of constructs. Not only are these models affected by direct interaction with an individual, but also by social discussion of interactions. In these interactions, both with new people and with discussants, an individual is able to (re)form his mental models. It's important to note that the magnitude of change is highly dependent on how willing an individual is to alter his initial opinions. (Sadly, if I remember correctly, people are more likely to rewrite history than to alter their mental models, making first impressions highly valuable.)

People use these models to build stereotypes, in order to make assumptions about proper ways to act in future situations. Stereotypes are often quite valuable, saving time and effort by allowing assumptions to be derived based on past experiences. Although stereotypes are built based on a descriptive understanding of past events, they are used prescriptively in new situations. Depending on how malleable one's mental models are, stereotypes are rewritten when enough social interactions indicate their lack of validity. Without a willingness to change, everything starts to look like a nail to the owner of a hammer. This lack of adjustment is precisely what allows problematic stereotypes to continue over time and develop into negative prejudices.

In short, Simmel's theories on mental models go a long way in explaining social prejudices by allowing us to reflect on how people perceive and categorize those around them in order to properly interact in a social setting.